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ABSTRACT

Factors that contributed to the demoralization of junior faculty at a university with 214 teaching and professional staff were identified and change strategies were recommended. A consultant held interviews with 65 current and 8 former staff members. Themes that emerged from the interviews were used to develop suggestions for improving specific work situations. Findings from the interviews were presented by the consultant to the university through seven 2-hour working sessions. The feedback sessions made it possible to share responsibility for interpreting the findings, to exchange feelings and perceptions, and to make and implement decisions that could bring about change. The groups taking part in the sessions were a mixture of department chairs, junior faculty, women and men, professional staff, and teaching faculty. A report on the themes and discussion topics were distributed to those who had been unable to attend the small-group sessions. Top administrators were invited to convene a group of concerned staff who could select priority issues and develop action plans, with time tables and targets. The overall objective of the approach was to help staff see the factors contributing to demoralization and to actively implement remedies. (SW)

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DATA FEEDBACK: A CHANGE TOOL FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF WORK LIFE IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Background

In response to an initiative taken by the women of Committee W and _____ University, the Provost made the decision to bring a consultant to campus to help sort out issues of morale among young faculty. As an independent educational consultant, I was invited to assist in identifying patterns of demoralization and to make specific recommendations to the University administration, to Committee W, and to junior faculty about steps which could be taken to improve the situation. The report I was asked to prepare represented the dissemination vehicle for the study's findings and recommendations.

Data Collection

I began this study with a five-day visit to the campus (April 1983) to interview staff members particularly interested in the morale of younger faculty. During the first few days the Provost had arranged open meetings to be held for women librarians, professional and teaching staff women, non-tenure track faculty, Committee W members, tenure-track junior faculty, women professional staff, and department chairs. During the remainder of the week, I met by appointment with those who wished to talk with me individually. Some persons (mostly junior faculty) participated in both individual and small-group sessions.

Because of the loosely-knit structure of the groups (people wandering in and out as their schedules permitted), I was not able to keep track of everyone who met with me. Thus, the figures which follow represent a close and modest approximation.

	Faculty		Top Administrators	Professional	Total
	Tenured	Nontenured			
Women	7	18	–	15	40
Men	8*	10	3	4	25

With a total staff (teaching and professional) of 214 at _____, 65 women and men represents 31 percent of the total population. In addition, I held telephone interviews with two men and one nontenured faculty woman and five professional staff women who had left the institution and are now employed elsewhere. In all, I interviewed 27 men and 46 women, bringing the total to 73 respondents. Of all of these, one was a minority man and one a minority woman.

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No attempt was made to insure that the sample was "representative" of the total population. Participation was strictly voluntary. Nevertheless, the sample did consist of persons representing all levels of involvement and a variety of statuses – administrators, faculty, and professional staff.

Interview Questions

The most often asked open-ended questions in the interview stage of the study were the following:

1. When did you first start working here?
2. How long have you worked for this university?
3. What kind of a contract are you on and what is your status (i.e., teaching, professional, etc.)?
4. What's happening that you're unhappy about?
5. What kinds of problems are you having?
6. What's causing all the frustration?
7. Having you done anything to deal with the problems you have described?
8. Do you think people other than yourself feel the same?
9. Is there anything else I should know about if I want to understand what goes on around here?

Such questions were used as a general guide, rather than as a script which I had to adhere to strictly. In most interviews a beginning question was followed by one or more others designed to amplify the first, either to probe for additional information or to obtain clariy. Interviewees were assured that their perceptions and feelings would be used constructively, professionally, and anonymously – that the data would be reported only in summary form.

I took virtually 150 pages of verbatim notes, from which the data were sorted into 17 themes.* Each of these themes was then identified with nonevaluative titles, such as pain, conflict, treatment of women faculty, and communication. Actual statements or paraphrased statements of the respondents were then grouped under the relevant theme.

Two typical themes with supporting statements are shown as examples:

Respondents: Theme 1: Ambiguity
Junior faculty
(women & men)

1. We are hired on contracts that are tenure track, non-tenure track, and grey area (chance of becoming tenure track) ... we see them as "weasel contracts." The administration tries to be nice by weaseling.
2. I'm generating hope but I wonder if I'm crazy doing it all. Even though we are told we will never get tenure, situation sometimes changes and we might become tenure track.
3. Feel an obligation to do it all. Looking for another job while acting like tenure track is like having two jobs. Can't humanly do all things.
4. They don't tell us if we'll be rehired or when we'll know.

*A theme was arbitrarily defined as an issue or concern which was spontaneously mentioned by at least 50 percent of those interviewed (For additional information on this technique, see Harvey & Albertson, n.d.)

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5. Unclear reappointment procedures . . . criteria for reappointment vary . . . conflicting expectations for tenure and non-tenure track.
6. They talk about how terrible it might be, if something happens to the freshman class – but it doesn't – enrollment thrives . . . mixed signals.
7. Tenure criteria aren't being applied equally in and between departments.
8. We never stop worrying about our jobs.
9. If I loathed this place, all this wouldn't matter.

Respondents: Faculty and professional staff (women)

Theme 2: Treatment of Women Faculty

1. We are mistreated by the students. Inappropriate student behavior more likely to be directed at women faculty.
2. I wouldn't want to be part of many departments. Treating women as not important with an attitude of what are you doing here anyway?
3. My work isn't appreciated. Women's studies not considered professional. Feminism is a cause; not intellectually valued.
4. No professional recognition. Women's studies courses demeaned.
5. The men treat us as equals more than the other women.
6. X position is open. What would the other women think if I went after it?
7. Pressure comes from other women on this campus. Not malicious as people but it's the process.
8. I got a lot of congratulations from men when I was promoted. I don't know how the women feel.

Data Feedback To Organization Members

After the data were collected and sorted into themes, I presented both the themes and some supporting statements to interested members of the university community by holding seven two-hour working sessions over a period of two days. Participants discussed, clarified, and modified some of the supporting statements. As a basis for some of the discussions, participants rank-ordered the themes. Several also made specific suggestions as to what they wanted included in the final report. In these work sessions I used the themes that had surfaced as a means to develop recommendations from participants for improving their own situation. By making it possible to share responsibility for interpreting the data, to exchange feelings and perceptions and to make and implement decisions that could bring about change, the data feedback sessions helped to transfer ownership of the data. In this way participants could become their own change agents. My goal in emphasizing data collection, diagnosis, and data feedback was to leave the participants with tools which they could continue to apply to similar problems in the future (Miles, 1969; Nadler, 1977).

The groups were mixed – chairs, junior faculty, women and men, professional and teaching faculty. All members of the university were invited to attend, whether or not they had participated in the first phase of the data collection. About 45 women and men met in small groups. Committee W as an entity held a separate meeting. Approximately 26 women attended this special meeting, some of whom also participated in the other small-group sessions. The data (themes and supporting statements) discussed by the small groups were later distributed to those who had been unable to attend the small-group sessions. Observational data collected on the ways individuals worked in the groups, as well as comments from themselves on their own discoveries during these meetings, were also included in the final report.

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The Purposes Of The Report

The purposes for undertaking the study were: 1) to identify the elements or factors that had contributed to the demoralization of junior faculty, 2) to illustrate how different dimensions of the problem affected one another, and 3) to make recommendations and identify strategies to change or improve the morale within the university community. The report was designed to help individuals perceive, understand, and act upon the variables identified. It was intended to provide them with "insight" into what was going on around them, within themselves, and between them and their colleagues. To help participants put their experience into perspective, I responded to the questions they repeatedly raised: "How much of what's going on here is due to what's going on generally in society and what is typically _____?" and "What problems do women and men junior faculty have in common and what are their differences?"

My ultimate goal in conducting data-feedback sessions and in writing the report was to provide information, strategies, and tools to help individuals help themselves, to problem-solve, and to implement their own solutions. My role as a process consultant was to help the system help itself – not to solve problems for individuals within the system.*

For change to occur, people must see the factors contributing to demoralization and be actively involved in implementing the remedies. They must also be parties in deciding which remedies should be applied. Rather than providing the university with a plan for change, I offered a set of suggestions and steps that might be implemented by individuals, as well as by tasks forces or larger groups of concerned, faculty, professionals and administrators.

This report on the morale of junior faculty represented not only a first step at _____ but also placed this small liberal arts college in the vanguard nationally of institutions of higher education that are trying to take action to improve their work environment for junior faculty.** Because a university functions as a system with interdependent components and processes, the suggestions in this report for improving the lot of junior faculty will, it is hoped, impact favorably on the quality of work life for all its staff.

Distribution Of The Report

I recommended that the administration distribute the full report to all administrators, faculty, and staff. The report was to be considered an invitation to continue the open conversations and discussions begun at the earlier data feedback sessions. According to the participants, the most positive result of those sessions had been the increased sharing with others of feeling, perceptions, and job problems. This process in turn increased understanding and empathy among and between the various groups (e.g., men and women, older and younger faculty, professional staff and teaching faculty).

To improve junior faculty morale, the top administration of any institution must be willing to commit time and effort, talent and expertise, status and prestige to an organization-wide, long-term change effort (Lippitt, 1982). Thus, as the final recommendation in my report, top administration were invited to convene a group of concerned people throughout the university who could select priority issues and begin working on them in task forces. Each subgroup could then produce action steps for

*For further details on process consultation as a way of studying organizations, see Schein, 1969.
**Carol Simpson Stearn, Chair of AAUP's Task Force on Younger Faculty, informed by telephone in May 1983 that, to her knowledge, no other report of this nature exists.

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its specific recommendations, with time tables and targets. It might also be able to secure a commitment from top administration for action on priorities that the employee group most wanted attending to. Such subgroup meetings* can generate a great deal of commitment to the institution and a desire for results by a large number of employees. But it then becomes crucial for top administration to put that energy and newly acquired information to work. If there are great promises but little follow-up action, more harm can be caused to junior faculty's morale than if the meetings had never been held. "Data gathering brings discontent to the surface so it can be confronted and eliminated. If it is not acted on in this manner, it will erupt and cause intense stress on the organization, resulting in ineffeciency and lowered productivity" (Vogt et al., 1983: 258-259).

"Middle managers" (chairs, directors, etc.) have a significant role to play in the implementation and support of such recommendations. Often middle managers assume a distant "wait and see" stance toward change activities undertaken by members of their own departments or divisions, or by outside consultants. In my view, such a stance is decidedly ill-advised. For the behavior of deans and chairs, perhaps more than any other single factor, ultimately determines whether desire for change can lead to success or fail as "good ideas that won't work in our university."

Because of time constraints and personal preferences, some faculty may not have been able to participate in group sessions. To meet their needs, a number of readings were suggested. In addition, it was recommended that many of the issues discussed in the report become topics to be addressed by campus speakers, or discussed at faculty luncheons, workshops and training sessions.

Implementation Of Change

The literature on change shows how individuals, groups, and organizations tend to resist change. Resistance to change is entrenched in colleges and universities. The values of a higher education institution, perpetuated by long tradition, work against those seeking modifications.

Since the values and structure of institutions of higher education resist reform, members of a university community must make special efforts to be open to new behaviors and approaches, to speak up, and to be willing to address new issues directly. Leadership by example can help engage the support of others less change-oriented and enable the institution to move toward the goal of improving its quality of work life.

Conclusion

Employees in all sectors of the work world are becoming concerned with what is called the "quality of work life." The phrase refers to the degree to which employees' personal needs are satisfied within the institution of which they are a part – from the need for job security to the need for meaningful interaction with colleagues. Research (Lippitt & Rumley, 1977) shows that some of the necessary components of a satisfying work environment are:

- Participating workers are involved in decisions concerning what is done and how it is achieved.
- Information and feedback are supplied to workers regarding their own performance.
- Communication within and among work groups is planned and encouraged.

*For the design of such a meeting, see Beckhard, 1969.

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All three of these processes result in increased job satisfaction and higher worker productivity. Unknowingly, many organizations deny quality of work life by curtailing opportunities for their employees to satisfy their individual needs.

Now, more than ever, such denial of work place satisfaction is occurring in higher education. Like the automotive and steel industries, higher education is confronting economic difficulties (cited in Brookes & German, 1983:7). As job mobility decreases, responsibilities increase, and rewards dwindle, we can also expect a lowering of faculty commitment to the institution. "As the struggle for survival intensifies, the disparity between the goals of the institution and the goals of the faculty is increasing. Further demands will increase the depersonalization and alienation of faculty if their needs are not taken into account" (p.10). The change model described here can serve as a useful tool to help improve the quality of work life in colleges and universities elsewhere.

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